

Relaxation techniques – a presence in psychotherapeutic interventions

Barbara Crăciun

Titu Maiorescu University, Bucharest, Romania

Psychotherapy is often defined as the quantum of individual and group rapports that seek to improve mental or psychosomatic suffering. The protocols for therapeutic intervention are intended to decrease negative emotional experiences, and in the case of cognitive-behavioral therapy to reduce the somatic physiological reactivity (Dobson & Dobson, 2009).

Behavioral and cognitive therapies rely on the belief that people with psychological problems are capable of producing changes in their lives by learning new strategies for assessing the reality (Beck, 1979). Many psychotherapists believe that the aim of psychotherapy is to turn these beliefs into a set of skills (Holdevici, 2010). Psychotherapy most often is seen as an interpersonal relationship between the client and the psychotherapist (Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978).

In this context one of the purposes of this connection is to investigate and to understand the patient's problems in order to correct the malfunction and to free the person from suffering (Beck, 1979).

Relaxation is one of the psychotherapeutic techniques used to relieve muscle and nerves tension, efficiently improving physical and mental wellbeing by increasing the resistance to stress and also reducing the negative effects of the stress already installed.

“Relaxation” is a generally known word but it is often used and understood as a synonym for inner peace, rest or state of calm (Rinpoche, 2015). The term “relaxation” comes from the Latin word “relaxatio” (release, recreation, relief and peace) and is a nonspecific psychophysiological state of the body that can be reached by systemically and constantly projecting specific exercises developed and intended for that purpose and also by creating ambient conditions which support this state (Holdevici & Crăciun, 2013).

Related research and clinical experience has found that practicing relaxation exercises has beneficial effects, whether we are talking about healthy persons or patients suffering from certain diseases (Benson & Klipper, 1992). Clinical observations on healthy subjects who were practicing relaxation have shown benefits like memory improvement, better focus of attention (Rebok, Carlson, & Langbaum, 2007), increased thinking and learning flexibility, reduced fatigue,

Corresponding author: Barbara Crăciun, Ph.D

Phone number: -

E-mail address: barbaracraciun@yahoo.com

increased capacity of solving problems and increased mental wellbeing (Scully, Kremer, Meade, Graham, & Dudgeon, 1998; Kaplan, 2001). Regarding individuals with various diseases, using relaxation as a single treatment modality or in combination with other techniques, it has been found to be effective in the improvement or disappearance of the various states of anxiety, insomnia, pain, toothache, headache, hypertension, nervousness (McCraty, Atkinson, & Tomasino, 2003; Reid, Papaleontiou, Ong, Breckman, Wethington, & Pillemer, 2008).

In relaxation techniques, through verbal and imaginative autosuggestions, the subject is invited to participate actively in obtaining progressive and conscious control of volatile organic structures and functions that are predominantly vegetative (Holdevici, 2010).

Relaxation techniques are based on the principle that psychosomatic function is in a continuous alternation between activity and rest, tension and recreation, harmony and conflict (Lazarus, 1984). Relaxation methods were developed knowing that any conflict or tension is likely to lead to a state of neuromuscular tension which comes out psychically through hyper excitability, irritability, anxiety and physiologically by significant increases in secretion of catecholamine, cortisol, increased blood pressure and pulse (Zimmerman, & Frohlich, 1990).

Amongst the relaxation techniques, autogenic training and progressive relaxation are used more often. Autogenic training was developed by Schultz in 1912 and the purpose of this technique was to induce a general disconnection of the body using physiological exercises (Stetter & Kupper, 2002). The effects of the autogenic training are related to the potentiation of the intellectual processes, sleep induction and physical and mental resource mobilization. Physiologically, there were found advantages like reduced blood sugar levels, reduced cholesterol and iodine protein, blood formula normalization and basal metabolic regulation (Linden, 1993).

Jacobson's progressive relaxation technique is based on the idea that by reducing the intensity of the emotional reactions through muscle stress relieving, we achieve the diminishing of proprioceptive and interoceptive impulses that contribute to strengthening the state of nervous tension (Jacobson, 1938). The relaxed muscle frees the brain of the excess excitation that stops the efficient functioning of the processes that imply attention, memory, focusing and decision and selection capacities. Therefore, these processes are optimized (Nicassio & Bootzin, 1974).

Through relaxation exercises, individuals learn to loosen tension in all muscle groups, or at least a part of them, in order to help relieve psychic stress. To help fortifying the relaxation state, suggestion and autosuggestion play a significant part. Therefore, Gheorghiu emphasizes certain predispositions or traits that can encourage receptivity towards suggestion: fantasizing, transposing, conforming, subordination and capturing (Gheorghiu, 1977). Suggestion and autosuggestion represent one of the base mechanisms of relaxation (Loew, Sohn, Martus, Tritt, & Rechlin, 2000).

The relaxation techniques, particularly the autogenic training, are aiming to obtain muscle or mental relief through suggestion and autosuggestion. They operate, foremost, by inducing a relaxation state, obtaining the sensations of heaviness and warmth and calming of breath. The relaxation exercises are done by monotone and repetitive suggestions and also through images meant to mediate concentration (Holdevici & Crăciun, 2015).

Both relaxation and hypnosis suggestions for ego-strengthening (Hartland, 1965) can be combined with techniques such as visualization (Phillips & Frederick, 1992). The next step is to communicate with the unconscious by applying suggestions tailored for clients' needs about being able to rely on their own body and their power of recovery, the final step being the visualization of healing.

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